

Tuneup for 800 MHz system: \$13.7M proposed for upgrades to emergency network

By Joe Rogalsky, Delaware State News 2/1/2006

DOVER - The budget proposal Gov. Ruth Ann Minner released last week includes money to further the state's effort to build the "next generation" of its emergency radio system.

Firefighters, police officers and other emergency workers use the 800-megahertz system to communicate.

Before the system was installed in the late 1990s, each emergency agency had its own network and different agencies had difficulty talking to one another.

The system also comes in handy during non-emergency situations with large crowds, such as the annual Fourth of July fireworks in Rehoboth Beach.

Department of Transportation workers, the state police and emergency medical services personnel have to communicate during the event, especially in the traffic rush as the crowd exits after the fireworks end.

The governor's budget plan, which would take effect July 1, appropriates \$13.7 million for the 800 MHz system.

It's the second installment of a four-year \$51 million plan to upgrade the system.

The overhaul includes new towers and antennas, new signal-amplification equipment and updates to the software that runs the system.

"This system is vital for the safety and efficiency of our state's emergency and rescue personnel," Gov. Minner said last week.

The fiscal 2007 funding would upgrade equipment on existing towers and fund two new towers in Sussex County near Roxana and Bethany Beach.

The capital budget for fiscal 2006 included \$19 million for the first phase of the major upgrade.

The money funded new equipment for New Castle County, plus new antenna sites in Milford and Laurel to provide increased signal penetration and in-building coverage.

The money also will purchase 400 devices that can be installed in emergency vehicles and will boost the system's signal for surrounding users.

The state's operating budget for fiscal 2006 earmarked \$164,000 to hire two communications specialists to work on radio communication for the Delaware Volunteer Firemen's Association and provide support for the 800 MHz system.

The state spent about \$50 million installing the system in the late 1990s, then spent an additional \$4.5 million between 2001 and 2003 to improve signal reception inside buildings and on streets in Claymont, Hartly and Rehoboth Beach.

A \$2.5 million federal grant helped boost the signal reception in Rehoboth Beach in 2004.

"We have 99.9 percent coverage," said Rehoboth Beach Police Chief Keith Banks.

"We do not have any concerns about coverage."

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